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Circumventing the "Wow Factor": Pitfalls and Recommendations When Infusing New Technologies

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With the advent of emerging technologies in the educational arena, decision makers, at times, feel compelled to “jump on board” or get left behind the technology train. Clearly, the pressure is on with colleges now being ranked for its use of technology as in “America’s Top Wired Colleges” (Burnett 2003) and more and more students refusing to leave their technological wits at the schoolyard doors. Naysayers to the technology movement in education liken it to trends similar to the new math of the 60’s, the open classrooms of the 70’s, or the Charter schools of today. Over the last three decades, however, emerging technologies and its uses have increased exponentially, “nearly 300%”(Gosmire and Grady 2007, 12) and have changed and will continue to change how instruction is delivered inside and outside of the classroom for decades to follow. Indeed, the facts are clear and the reality is obvious —technology will remain a permanent fixture in educational settings.

Yet, this fact alone poses a perplexing problem for educators across the globe. Determining what product to invest in that will provide the most benefit for learners and best support the technological infrastructure of the district or institution being served. Further, with pressure to infuse technology at a premium, the price tag for technology increasing, and the shrinking educational dollars, it would behoove decision makers to maintain a healthy sense of skepticism during the selection process while securing new technologies (or risk making less than competent decisions that could lead to minimal results).

Skepticism is Not Always a Bad Thing

Adopting a sense of skepticism, then, helps decision makers to counter that spellbound feeling one gets when assessing new technologies with all their “bells and whistles”—the *“wow factor.”* We have all experienced the “wow factor” at work. You are walking through a conference that is showcasing a product, or you are sitting through a “live” demonstration of a product, and you are completely captivated by it (amazed at the product). You think to yourself (all within 45-seconds), *“This product would be great for my school.”* It seems so innocent at first, but you have just been bit by the “wow factor.” When accessing various technologies, it is important to maintain a proper perspective and realize that there is no panacea out there (no matter how enticing the product may appear initially). Thus, skepticism becomes ones greatest tool in assessing educational technology. Indeed, healthy skepticism helps to thwart off the “wow factor” and enable decision makers to look beyond the possibilities of the technology (which tend to dazzle) and focus more on the specific and direct needs of their learners and overall technology infrastructure (within their district or institution being served). What is important to keep in mind (especially when considering the infusion of far-reaching technologies) is that what works for one, does not work for all. Software and hardware companies wishing to influence educational decision makers tend to lump educational organizations together and market with that approach in mind. To these companies, the broader reach, the better. With that in mind, it would benefit decision-makers in educational settings to understand that ones role is *not* to find the best or latest technology, but rather, to find the best and latest technology that will properly suit and fit within the confines of ones institution, district and infrastructure. The distinction is clear and should not be confused *nor* minimized.

There are five critical points that all decision makers should avoid when considering the adoption of new and far reaching technologies within an educational arena.

Name Recognition is Never Enough—Move Beyond the Data

Recently, I found myself engaged in a conversation with a senior level administrator from one of the largest school districts in my state. As the conversation progressed, she informed me that her district was elated to adopt a new software product district-wide. At first mention of the product, I was alarmed because this very product had been field tested in a variety of community colleges and universities (within her our state) with little to minimal results. Even more egregious, there were better products on the market free of charge. I felt compelled to inform her that the product (despite its heavy price tag and name recognition) was not that effective and was currently being phased out of many college circles within the state. The point— do your homework; don't find solace in product recognition— move beyond the sales representative (and even the data).

Marketers, advertisers and sales representatives know that educators want data highlighting product effectiveness, and they will supply you with that data. In fact, it would be difficult to find a representative to tell you their product is *not* effective, so expect that if you ask for supportive data, you will get it. The question is, then what? In reviewing a multitude of articles on the subject, educators are routinely encouraged to make data driven decisions (Doyle 2003; Jones 2006; Petrides 2006; Stinchcomb 2006). Of course, one should read and consider data. Indeed, the point makes sense and is not being challenged; though, another perspective is being offered. Data needs to be challenged and confirmed first hand (regardless of company or product name recognition), especially when making decisions about investing in far reaching technologies. Why? According to Trotter (1997),"Unprecedented support for school *technology* is spurring an investment of billions of dollars. But a lack of research and a dearth of data mean the payoff is unclear" (6). Confirming results first hand, then, not only can save one time and energy, but more importantly, it can lessen ones chances of purchasing the wrong product or wasting valuable dollars.

To begin, ask the sales representative for a listing of districts or institutions that are currently using the product within your state (or neighboring state). Avoid companies that have limited to no track record of proven success. If contact names can be provided, that is even better. *Go fishing*–contact academic administrators on the district or college level for direct feedback on the success of the product and see if you can get a recommendation (this can be accomplished through a simple phone call). Even better, ask the representative if their company will pay for you and a few colleagues (preferably a mixture of faculty, administrators and IT personnel) to visit a school utilizing the product. Be sure to focus on districts or institutions that have at least three years of experience working with the product.

Not Talking to IT (Upfront), Big Mistake

Administrators are instructional leaders and have a multitude of abilities, but they are not always the technology experts sitting at the table (Gosmire 2007). In reality, one of the common mistakes many educational decision makers make is not involving Information Technology(IT) personnel during the initial evaluation of a product. IT is typically brought in after a decision has been made leaving the IT team scrambling to support a product that may be too sophisticated for the current infrastructure in place. Surprising, though, research suggests that contrary to what many people think "…technology

infrastructure is the single most important factor in integrating technology…[opposed to] technical support, faculty incentives, awareness, and training to use technology," which are often viewed as being more important (Surry, Ensminger and Haab 2005, 328). The logic is clear here. One can invest in the superb products, but if the districts or institutions infrastructure cannot support the software or hardware, then the product loses its value, and the decision reached becomes flawed and ill-advised. Often times those making the decisions about bringing in new technology (i.e., Blackboard/ Web CT, Convene, Embanet, eCollege.com, Symposium, iPods, Tegrity, The Learning Manager, IntraLearn, etc.) are not equipped with the technological expertise that will best determine whether or not a product is capable of being fully supported by the current system's capabilities. Indeed, educators confuse product assessment with product workability.

Thus, the inclusion of an IT person as part of the team is crucial. Indeed, districts and institutions, often times feeling overwhelmed with keeping up with IT requirements to support technology, are now shifting towards outsourcing this responsibility (Collegis 2005). This trend further supports the importance of rethinking how to support the very technology that districts and institutions want to infuse. Working from the selection process first and then thinking about infusion later is counter-productive and can lead to advanced technologies going to waste and being under underutilized. In other words, what is the sense of having products like Tegrity, iPod instruction, but your district or institution does not have enough Internet bandwidth to support videostreaming (an integral aspect of these products).

Know Your Limitations and Plan for Your Future

One thing about the "wow factor" is that it is almost palpable. You may want the very product or offer the same services as other schools (i.e., a free laptop for every student) that your district or institution cannot support. What is important to keep in mind is that it is better to start off small with selecting and infusing technology, opposed to taking broad steps and failing. When districts or institutions take on more than they can handle, the technology can prove overwhelming to faculty and staff and your IT services. This can lead to poor performing technology, system shutdowns and ultimately lead to a lack of confidence in the product itself.

The key is to assess/inventory your current technological infrastructure, determine your needs and develop a plan of action in stages (ideally over a three to five year period). In determining technology goals, one must consider budget constraints and a strategy to move one's district or institution in an innovative and creative way. Successful technology plans begin with an assessment of current systems. "A *technology* assessment done well provides a vivid status check on where your…[district or institution] stands, infrastructure-wise, and also provides a baseline from which to build" (Revenaugh 1999, 11).

The other factor, besides hands-on inventory, to consider is your learner. Are you in a rural or urban area? Do most of your students have access to Internet services at home or are they dependent on school-based access? Are textbooks more software supported or contain more Internet based supplements? What direction would faculty like to move in in terms of technology in the classroom—what are their needs? Is broadening your Distance Education program important? What about video conferencing—is this an area of interest? The key is to find a focus and plan out a workable, realistic strategy that highlights key goals to achieve each academic year. Training of faculty, staff and students should be included in this plan as well.

No Buy In, No Tie In

Technology infusion can often find its way in districts and institutions from the top down, rather than from the ground up. Districts and institutions should work to avoid making sweeping decisions that ultimately impact faculty and students (to carry out) without getting their buy in up front. An effective way to secure input is to sponsor a showcase of products. Here, a district or institution would invite numerous sales representatives to demonstrate their products to the entire faculty and/or staff as a professional development opportunity. Faculty and staff would rate each product and provide comments and recommendations for use. In fact, in a recent survey conducted by the National School Board Association, 45% of respondents reported that integrating technology in the classroom was a major hurdle (Scurry 2007); thus, when considering infusing new technologies, faculty input should never go unquestioned because, typically, they will be the one's working with the technology the most.

Training is Verb, Not a Noun

Getting the product is one thing, protecting your investment is another. The term "protecting" in this case is being use to highlight the need for continuous and far reaching use of a product. With software renewal licenses costing tens of thousands of dollars, districts and institutions alike need to provide ample enough training activities to maximize product use. If not, the investment, regardless of the quality of the product, was meaningless.

Throughout the educational circles and within current literature, training is highlighted, but what needs to be emphasized is training needs to be continually built upon and revisited. It is not good enough to simply offer initial training, which many districts and institutions do. This thrust to launch the product and engage one's audience is routine. The product is purchased and initial training is put in place. Yet, where are these schools after one year or two years after implementation? Is training still a push? Is product quality (both its strengths and weaknesses) discussed among faculty and staff members? Is system trouble-shooting a mainstay? *And*…what about adjunct faculty members? How are they trained and how are new faculty members trained? All of these are essential aspects that can make or break successful implementation plans.

The objective should be clear; training should become as central to the culture of the college as instruction because the two go hand-in-hand. The question is how to create a climate of training and learning? The first thing to do is make training dates and flexible time schedules that include both day and evening training times. Training dates and times should include evenings and weekends for adjunct faculty. Training should also be routine. One recommendation would be to create a training schedule that outlines training on a weekly or bi-weekly schedule. Districts and institutions also benefit greatly from teacher trainers, coaches and mentors. Training a group of instructors to serve as trainers is one of the most effective ways to meet training needs. In addition, pairing instructors together to mentor one another through the process of learning the new technology has been proven to be quite beneficial as well.

Conclusion

To that end, there are many factors that decision makers need to consider when adopting and infusing new technology within school districts and institutions from avoiding the "wow factor" to listening to IT regarding implementation restrictions to creating an implementation strategy. The key is to find the

perfect fit for one's district and to ultimately provide for substantial product support and training to not only benefit learners but to improve the overall instructional experience for faculty. The task of finding the perfect technology fit for one's district or institution is not an easy one, but it will be well worth the effort if you find one.

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